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Message Text

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 04688 301143Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB, PINT, CE

SUBJ: STRIKE AT GSL CEMENT CORPORATION PLANT

1. BEGIN UNCLASSIFIED: SUMMARY. THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT A LEFTIST-UNION LED STRIKE AT THE GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA (GSL) CEMENT PLANT IN PUTTALAM HAS ENDED MAY, IN FACT, HAVE ONLY MARKED THE BEGINNING OF THE MOST SERIOUS TRADE UNION PROBLEM THAT THE YOUNG UNITED NATIONAL PARTY GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN FORCED TO FACE. THE STRIKE, WHICH RAN FROM NOVEMBER 17 TO NOVEMBER 28, INVOLVED EMPLOYEE DISMISSALS, LOCKOUTS, ALLEGED SABOTAGE AND THREATS OF VIOLENCE, AND REQUIRED MILITARY SECURITY FORCES TO RESTORE ORDER. ALTHOUGH UNION LEADERS CALLED OFF THE STRIKE, THEY PLAN A TOKEN STRIKE THROUGHOUT THE SRI LANKA CEMENT CORPORATION'S OFFICES AND FACILITIES NOVEMBER 30. END SUMMARY.

2. STRIKE ISSUES
AN ELEVEN-DAY STRIKE AT THE SRI LANKA CEMENT CORPORATION PLANT AT PUTTALAM HAS ENDED. STRIKE ISSUES, HOWEVER, REMAIN UNRESOLVED.

3. LED BY THE LEFTIST LANKA SAMA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP) UNION,
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PAGE 02 COLOMB 04688 301143Z

THE STRIKE BEGAN NOVEMBER 17, ONE DAY AFTER SEVEN UNION MEMBERS WERE PLACED ON COMPULSORY LEAVE WITHOUT PAY FOR ALLEGEDLY CHEATING ON OVERTIME PAY CARDS. REPORTEDLY, PLANT OFFICIALS REFUSED TO DISCUSS THE ACTION WITH UNION LEADERS, AN ARGUMENT ENSUED IN WHICH A PLANT OFFICIAL WAS THREATENED BY A UNION LEADER, AND POLICE WERE CALLED TO RESTORE ORDER. ACCORDING TO REPORTS, UNION OFFICIALS WERE THEN LOCKED OUT OF THE PLANT.

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

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A UNION-ORDERED WORK SLOWDOWN FOLLOWED, SPURRING MORE HEATED ENCOUNTERS. PLANT OPERATIONS CEASED COMPLETELY AT 5:30 P.M. NOVEMBER 16 AMID REPORTS OF ATTEMPTED SABOTAGE WITHIN THE PLANT.

4. UNION CHARGES POLITICAL DISCRIMINATION
LSSP UNION LEADERS ANNOUNCED THE STRIKE ON MORNING OF NOVEMBER 17. THE STATED THAT STRIKE WAS TO PROTEST RECENT HARASSMENT AND POLITICAL DISCRIMINATION SUFFERED BY THEIR MEMBERS AT HANDS OF PLANT OFFICIALS. THEY CHARGED THAT OFFICIALS FAVORED PRO-UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP) WORKERS AND THAT THE SEVEN UNION MEMBERS PLACED ON COMPULSORY LEAVE HAD BEEN REPLACED BY PRO-UNP WORKERS. THE LATTER, THEY SAID, WAS CHARACTERISTIC OF RECENT PLANT MANAGEMENT ATTITUDE TOWARD UNION MEMBERS.

5. SRI LANKA AIR FORCE PROVIDES SECURITY
PLANT PRODUCTION RESUMED LATE NOVEMBER 17. HOWEVER, CLASHES BETWEEN UNION MEMBERS AND NON-UNION MEMBERS AND BETWEEN UNION MEMBERS AND MANAGEMENT PROMPTED A CALL FROM MANAGEMENT FOR INCREASED SECURITY. A SQUAD OF SRI LANKA AIR FORCE PERSONNEL WAS ASSIGNED TO GUARD THE PLANT AND SURROUNDING AREA. SPORADIC PRODUCTION, OFT-BROKEN BY HEATED ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN PLANT ADVSERSARIES, CONTINUED UNTIL NOVEMBER 28 WHEN UNION LEADERS ANNOUNCED THE STRIKE HAD ENDED.

6. UNION MEMBERS JAILED
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REPORTEDLY, ABOUT 20 UNION MEMBERS WERE JAILED DURING THE STRIKE, ALLEGEDLY FOR ATTEMPTING TO SABOTAGE THE PLANT OR FOR THREATENING TO ASSAULT PLANT OFFICIALS. ALL HAVE SINCE BEEN RELEASED.

7. PLAN TOKEN STRIKE NOVEMBER 30
LEADERS OF LSSP AND OTHER LEFTIST UNIONS (COMMUNIST PARTY, CEYLON MERCANTILE UNION, SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY) HAVE ANNOUNCED INTENTION TO STAGE A ONE-DAY TOKEN STRIKE NOVEMBER 30 AT CEMENT CORPORATION PLANTS AT GALLE, KANKESANTURAI, AND PUTTALAM, AND AT THE CORPORATION HEADQUARTERS IN COLOMBO. ACCORDING TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT, THE TOKEN STRIKE IS TO PROTEST DISCRIMINATION AGAINST UNION WORKERS AT PUTTALAM PLANT, AND TO PROTEST GOVERN-MENT HANDLING OF STRIKE. THEY STATE THAT STRIKE CALLED OFF ONLY BECAUSE OF "REPRESSIVE MEASURES" TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT TO FORCE WORKERS TO RETURN TO WORK. REPORTS SAY THAT PRIMARY AMONG MEASURES THEY REFER TO IS STATEMENT ISSUED BY GOVERNMENT NOVEMBER 23 TO EFFECT THAT STRIKING EMPLOYEES WERE REGARDED AS HAVING ABANDONED THEIR JOBS AND WOULD BE REPLACED, AND THAT ONCE REPLACED, A WORKER AND HIS FAMILY WOULD NO LONGER BE ELIGIBLE TO OCCUPY GOVERNMENT-PROVIDED HOUSING NEAR THE PLANT SITE.

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

8. ACCORDING TO UNION LEADERS, WORKERS COULD NOT AFFORD TO HAVE THEIR FAMILIES EVICTED, THUS WORKERS WERE COMPELLED TO END THE STRIKE AND RETURN TO WORK. THE NOVEMBER 17 STRIKE ISSUES AND SUBSEQUENT GOVERNMENT ACTIONS, TRADE UNION LEADERS SAY, LEAVE MUCH TO BE RESOLVED. END UNCLASSIFIED.

9. BEGIN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE. COMMENT
LEFTIST UNION LEADERS HAVE BEEN TRYING TO STIR OPPOSITION AGAINST THE UNP GOVERNMENT BUT HAVE HAD VERY LITTLE SUCCESS TO DATE. SOME ATTRIBUTE THE PAST LACK OF SUCCESS TO THE ABSENCE OF A REAL TRADE UNION ISSUE WITH WHICH TO RALLY MEMBERS' SUPPORT, SAYING THAT EVEN THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE LEFTIST UNIONS IS UNWILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES
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WHERE THE SOLE PURPOSE IS POLITICAL AGITATION, AT LEAST UNTIL MORE IS KNOWN OF THE UNP GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES CONCERNING WAGE EARNERS.

10. THE PROPOSED TOKEN STRIKE CENTERS AROUND MORE OR LESS LEGITIMATE TRADE UNION ISSUES. MOREOVER, IT IS WIDELY FLET THAT THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED GOVERNMENT BUDGET CALLS UPON THE MIDDLE TO LOW-LEVEL WAGE-EARNER TO MAKE SUBSTANTIAL SACRIFICES, AND THE LEFTIST TRADE UNION LEADERS HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO AROUSE WORKERS OVER THE BUDGET ISSUE.

11. IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO NOE HOW MUCH SUPPORT THE STRIKING UNIONS RECEIVE NOVEMBER 30, ESPECIALLY FROM OTHER TRADE UNIONS, AND TO OBSERVE THE GOVERNMENT'S REPONSE.
WRIGGINS

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Message Attributes

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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